DECISION RECORD

Reference: Environmental Assessment EA-NM-060-00-185.

Decision: It is my decision to authorize the issuance of a ten year grazing lease on public lands within the Caprock Ranch - Johnson Cattle Co. Allotment 65045. The grazing lease decision will implement the proposed action. The lease will allow 25 Animal Units yearlong at 100 % Federal Range for 300 Animal Unit Months. Five of these Animal Units or 60 AUM's will remain in suspension. Specifically to authorize a grazing lease on the Johnson Cattle Co. allotment for 20 Animal Units for 240 AUM's at 100% Federal Range from March 1 to the last day of February each year while continuing current livestock management practices. Any additional mitigation measures identified in the environmental impacts sections of the attached environmental assessment have been formulated into stipulations, terms and conditions. Any comments made to this proposed treatment were considered and any necessary changes have been incorporated into the environmental assessment.

Signed by T. R. Kreager — 1/25/01
Assistant Field Manager — Date

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
for
GRAZING AUTHORIZATION

ON

ALLOTMENT 65045

EA-NM-060-00-185

AUGUST, 2000

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Roswell Field Office
Roswell, New Mexico

I. Introduction

When authorizing livestock grazing on public range, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has historically relied on a land use plan and environmental impact statement to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). A recent decision by the Interior Board of Land Appeals, however, affirmed that the BLM must conduct a site-specific NEPA analysis before issuing a permit or lease to authorize livestock grazing. This environmental assessment fulfills the NEPA requirement by providing the necessary site-specific analysis of the effects of issuing a new grazing lease on allotment #65045.

The scope of this document is limited to the effects of issuing a new grazing lease on allotment #65045. Over time, the need could arise for subsequent management activities which relate to grazing authorizations. These future management actions related to livestock grazing would be addressed in project-specific NEPA documents as they are proposed.

A. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

The purpose of issuing a new grazing lease would be to authorize livestock grazing on public lands on allotment #65045. The lease would specify the types and levels of use authorized, and the terms and conditions of the authorization pursuant to 43 CFR §§4130.3, 4130.3-1, 4130.3-2 and 4180.1.

B. Conformance with Land Use Planning

Upon review of the Roswell Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (Bureau of Land Management 1997), the proposed action was found to conform with the Record of Decision as required by 43 CFR 1610.5-5.

C. Relationships to Statutes, Regulations, or Other Plans

The proposed action is consistent with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (43 U.S.C. 1700 et seq.); the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 (43 U.S.C. 315 et seq.), as amended; the Clean Water Act (33 U.S.C. 1251 et seq.), as amended; the Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C. 1535 et seq.) as amended; the Federal Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 (43 U.S.C. 1901 et seq.); Executive Order 11988, Floodplain Management and Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands.

Proposed Action and Alternatives

A. Proposed Action:

The proposed action is to authorize a grazing lease on the Johnson Cattle Co. allotment #65045 for 25 cattle yearlong at 100% Federal Range for 300 Animal Unit Months (AUM's). Five of these Animal Units or 60 AUM's will remain in suspension. Specifically to authorize a grazing lease on the Johnson Cattle Co. allotment for 20 Animal Units for 240 AUM's at 100% Federal Range from March 1 to the last day of February each year while continuing current livestock management practices.

B. No Lease authorization alternative:

This alternative would not issue a new grazing lease. There would be no livestock grazing authorized on public land within allotment # 65045. The No Grazing alternative was considered, but not chosen in the Rangeland Reform Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Record of Decision (ROD) (p. 28). The elimination of grazing in the Roswell Field Office Area was considered but eliminated by the Roswell RMP/ROD (pp. ROD-2).

III. Affected Environment

A. General Setting

A priority objective of the Roswell Field Office is to restore and maintain rangeland health and prairie chicken habitat within the shinnery oak ecosystem.. Overtime, we will be developing grazing systems on allotments with a high potential for management actions that will maintain/enhance prairie chicken habitat. The plans will include grazing schemes taylored to meet specific management objectives. Generally, these are allotments where there are large blocked federal lands versus small isolated parcels. These are the category of prairie chicken allotments in the Caprock Wildlife Habitat Area we refer to on page 31 of the Final Roswell Resource Management Plan (RMP). If you refer to AP8-1, Section 9, of the RMP you will see a list of allotments which includes allotment 65045. The Bureau may not take the lead in developing grazing management on these allotments, but will encourage coordination and cooperation between our agency, the Soil Conservation Service and State Land Office.

Allotment #65045 is located in eastern Chaves and western Lea counties, approximately 24 miles west of Tatum, New Mexico. The allotment consists of numerous pastures, with the two small tracts of public land occurring on the eastern side of the allotment. There is approximately 1,860 acres of public land on this Section 15 allotment. The public lands within this allotment are for the most part landlocked by private and state lands. Currently this allotment is categorized as a "C" or Custodial allotment.

Allotments 65045 lies outside of the Roswell Grazing District boundary established subsequent to the Taylor Grazing Act (TGA) and is classified as a Section 15 Grazing lease. Overall

livestock numbers on the allotment are not established by the Bureau of Land Management.. The amount of forage produced on Public land is the determining factor on the number of authorized livestock. In southeastern New Mexico, this is due primarily to either the small amount of public land and/or the public lands are situated in small or isolated tracts that can not be managed as effectively as larger well blocked public lands.

The following resources or values are not present or would not be affected: Prime/Unique Farmland, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Floodplains, Minority/Low Income Populations, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Hazardous/Solid Wastes, Wetlands/Riparian Zones, Noxious Weeds and Native American Religious Concerns. Cultural inventory surveys would continue to be required for public actions involving surface disturbing activities.

B. Affected Resources

1. Soils: The two primary soil units on the public lands are the Stromal -Faskin-Malstrom fine sands and the Roswell - Jalmar fine sands..

Stromal -Faskin-Malstrom

Soils are 50% Stromal fine sand and 30% Faskin and 15% Malstrom fine sand. Occurs on high terraces with 0-2 percent slope. The Faskin soil is deep and well drained. Permeability of this soil is moderate, available water capacity is high, runoff is medium, water erosion is moderate, while the hazard of soil blowing is very high. The Stromal soil is deep and well drained. Permeability of this soil is moderately rapid, available water capacity is high, runoff is slow, water erosion is moderate, while the hazard of soil blowing is very high.

Roswell - Jalmar

Soils are 60% Roswell fine sand, 35% Jalmar fine sand. The Roswell soil is on hummocky sand dunes and the Jalmar soil is in depressional areas and interdunal areas. The Roswell soil is deep and excessively drained. Permeability is rapid and water capacity is low. The potential plant community is mainly sand and little bluestem, sand paspalum and plains bristlegrass. When the plant community decreases and increase in plants like threeawn and sandsage become prevalent.

2. Vegetation: .

The primary ecological (range) site on the public lands is a Sand Hills CP-2 and Sandy Plains CP-2. Key vegetation within the Sand Hills CP-2 and the Sandy Plains CP-2 is shinnery oak with bluestem and dropseed grasses. The Sand Hills and Sandy Plains community is a unique ecological area dominated by tall and mid-grasses. In some areas, the shinnery oak community has shifted from a dominant sand bluestem/little bluestem/hairy grama grassland with varying amounts of shinnery oak, sand sage and yucca to a community dominated by sand dropseed, red and purple three-awn and hairy grama, with increasing annual forbs, shinnery oak, mesquite, sand sage and yucca. Currently, the Roswell Field Office (RFO) has limited vegetative data for this allotments because of the allotment categorization. Vegetative monitoring was conducted in 1977. Data at that time placed the public lands within the late ecological rating. Recent

vegetative monitoring was completed in March of 2000 and is summarized in the chart below.

Monitoring Data Summary, Allotment #65045							
Sand Hills CP-2 Ecological Site - Transect JT202							
	Grasses	forbs*	shrubs	trees	litter	bare ground	rock
Percent composition of vegetative cover	94.68	0	5.33	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
Percent ground cover	31.99		2.67		31.33	34.0	0

Sandy Hills CP-2 Ecological Site Transect BM202							
	Grasses	forbs*	shrubs	trees	litter	bare ground	rock
Percent composition of vegetative cover	45.33	0	54.66	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
Percent ground cover	22.01		3.0		47.67	27.33	0

*Forb percentages are not accurately reflected due to collection techniques. On pace point monitoring, only perennial species are recorded.

A production study exists in the Sandy Plains CP-2 range site and was inventoried in 1989. At that time, for production composition there was 93.10 % grasses, 5.33 % shrubs and 1.56% forbs.

The current vegetative resources on this allotment appear to be stable and the rangeland trend is static. The data used for this assessment is available at the Roswell Field Office.

3. Wildlife:

Game species occurring within the area include mule deer, pronghorn antelope, mourning dove, and scaled quail. Raptors that utilize the area on a more seasonal basis include the Swainson's, red-tailed, and ferruginous hawks, American kestrel, and great-horned owl. Numerous passerine birds utilize the grassland areas due to the variety of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. The most common include the western meadowlark, mockingbird, horned lark, killdeer, loggerhead shrike, and vesper sparrow.

The warm prairie environment supports a large number of reptile species compared to higher elevations. The more common reptiles include the short-horned lizard, lesser earless lizard, eastern fence lizard, coachwhip, bullsnake, prairie rattlesnake, and western rattlesnake.

A general description of wildlife occupying or potentially utilizing the proposed action area and associated Habitat Management Areas refer to the Affected Environment Section (p. 3-62 to 3-71) of the Draft Roswell RMP/EIS (9/1994).

4. Threatened and Endangered Species:

There are no known threatened or endangered species populations or critical habitat areas within this allotment. However, there are several Federal Proposed, Candidate and State listed species that may occupy or utilize the area. These include the Federally proposed mountain plover, lesser prairie chicken, sand dune lizard, swift fox, and the black-tailed prairie dog. For a detailed description of the range, habitats, and potential threats to the swift fox refer to the Biological Opinion (AP11-38) in the RMP.

Special Status Species

Sand Dune Lizard (State Threatened)

The State Threatened sand dune lizard only occurs in the southeastern corner of New Mexico and the western edges of Texas. Within that range its habitat is restricted to active sand dunes and their peripheries (Degenhardt and Jones 1972). Shinnery oak is the dominant plant species that surrounds the top edge of the active snad dune, with a small composition of grasses inside the blowout.

During 1991 a study was begun to examine the effects of the removal of shinnery oak on lizard habitat. Through five years of research it was demonstrated that there were 70-94% fewer lizards in treated pastures as compared to non-treated pastures. As a result, the use of herbicides within suitable sand dune lizard habitat (blowouts) will be avoided.

In the southern edge of the allotment, scattered shinnery oak dune blowouts or dune complexes exist and may provide habitat for the sand dune lizard.

Mountain Plover (Federally Proposed as Threatened)

The mountain plover was recently petitioned to be listed as a federally listed threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Until a determination is made by the USFWS, actions occurring within this species range and habitat must be analyzed and treated as a listed species.

The mountain plover is associated with shortgrass and shrub-steppe landscapes throughout its breeding and wintering range. Historically, on the breeding range it occurred on nearly denuded prairie dog towns (Knowles et al. 1982, olson-Edge and Edge 1987) and in areas of major bison concentration. All of the endemic grassland birds evolved within a grassland mosaic of lightly, moderately, and heavily grazed areas, and mountain plovers are considered to be strongly associated with sites of heaviest grazing pressure, to the point of excessive surface disturbance (Knopf and Miller 1994, Knopf 1996b). Short vegetation, bare ground, and a flat topography are now recognized as habitat-defining characteristics at both breeding and wintering locales. Most mountain plovers breed in Colorado and Montana; breeding also occurs in Wyoming, New Mexico, Arizona, Nebraska, Utah, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

Surveys: Information was taken from the Federal Register Notice and the Roswell RMP.

Statewide surveys have been conducted as well as area surveys by S. Williams. No known breeding populations or wintering locales have been found. Specific surveys for this action were not conducted since recent area surveys in May and June of 1998 were completed.

Lesser Prairie Chicken (Federal Candidate)

Several years ago a petition was filed with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to list the prairie chicken as threatened. On June 1, 1998 the FWS announced a finding for the petition. After review of all available scientific and commercial information, the Service finds that listing this species is warranted but precluded by other higher priority actions to amend the Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants. The lesser prairie chicken has been added to the Service's candidate species list.

In southeastern New Mexico, lesser prairie chickens exist in the shrub-dominated High Plains Bluestem Subtype by using mixed stands of tall grass and shinnery oak.

Male prairie chickens visit or establish booming grounds (leks) from early March to late May, with the peak booming activity occurring around the middle of April. Booming grounds can be found in mesquite shortgrass, shinnery oak grasslands, shinnery oak dunes, abandoned oil/gas pads, pipelines and roads. The basic requirement for lek sites is visibility of the immediate surroundings (shortgrass and topography)..

Female prairie chickens prefer range in excellent condition for nesting. In areas of shinnery oak, nesting studies (Copelin 1963, Riley 1978) indicate that these birds prefer shinnery oak rangeland habitat dominated by mid and tall grass species. Wisdom (1980) demonstrated that nesting success was enhanced by the presence of tall, wide clumps of sand bluestem, which are found in a few near-climax areas in the shinnery oak-grassland, while areas devoid of sand bluestem were not highly conducive to nesting success. In areas where sand bluestem is scarce, little bluestem apparently serves as an acceptable substitute Merchant (1982). Riley et al. (1992) found that most successful nests occurred where basal composition of sand bluestem was greater and the height of vegetation above successful nests averaged 67 cm, while height of vegetation above unsuccessful nests averaged 35 cm.

Copelin (1963) found that the most successful nests were placed between clumps of grass residue left from the previous year's growth that provided overhead cover.

Brooding areas are often within habitats which are in lower seral stages usually having a high proportion of bare ground and annual forbs (Riley et al. 1992, Jones 1963).

Food requirements vary among the seasons. Prairie chickens rely heavily (97%) on forbs and other green plant material during the spring and invertebrates in the summer. The early fall diets consist of invertebrates and green plant material, while winter diets consist of mast from shinnery oak.

Above is a general description of prairie chicken habitat requirements. As with most wildlife species, especially upland game birds, precipitation plays a large role in population fluctuations

and habitat conditions. Precipitation patterns have fluctuated drastically for the last twenty years. During the middle eighties precipitation was above normal and chicken populations responded very well. With the exception of a couple of years, precipitation has been well below normal during the 1990's.

Population Monitoring Data

The Roswell Field Office has actively monitored prairie chicken booming grounds, population trends and habitat since the early seventies within the Caprock Wildlife Habitat Area. Historically in New Mexico, the LPC occupied most of the eastern plains. However, numbers and occupied range of the species are much reduced since pre-settlement times; apparently in response to prolonged heavy grazing and brush control in combination with the great drouths of the 1930's and 1950's. It has been reported that currently the LPC occupies approximately one half their original range in New Mexico.

Prairie chickens are still known to occur within the area or in close proximity too. There is one known booming ground located on public land within this allotment. This booming ground has remained active since 1983. During the early eighties up to 27 birds would congregate on this booming ground. In the middle nineties only 2 were observed. However, the last two years there has been 16 and 18 birds respectively utilizing this booming grouond.

5. Livestock Management:

The allotment is operated as a cow/calf operation. The expiring grazing lease is for 25 cattle yearlong at 100% Federal Range for 300 Animal Unit Months (AUM's). Five of these Animal Units or 60 AUM's will remain in suspension. However, actual livestock numbers on the entire ranch are not controlled by the BLM as explained in the General Setting portion of the Affected Environment section above. Livestock are rotated through the pastures when conditions are favorable. During times of drought, livestock numbers are lowered and scattered throughout all pastures.

6. Visual Resources:

The allotments are located within a Class IV Visual Resource Management area. This means that contrasts may attract attention and be a dominant feature in the landscape in terms of scale. However, the changes should repeat the basic elements of the landscape.

7. Water Quality:

No perennial surface water is found on the Public Lands within these three allotments.

8. Air Quality:

Air quality in the region is generally good. The allotments are in a Class II area for the Prevention of Significant Deterioration of air quality as defined in the public Clean Air Act. Class II areas allow a moderate amount of air quality degradation.

9. Recreation:

Recreation opportunities are very limited in this allotment because the public has limited legal/physical access to public lands. Off Highway Vehicle designation for public lands within this allotment are classified as "Limited" to existing roads and trails.

10. Cave/Karst:

A complete significant cave or karst inventory has not been completed for the public lands located in allotment 65045. Presently, no known significant caves or karst features have been identified. This allotment is located within a designated area of Low Karst or Cave Potential.

IV. Environmental Impacts

A. Impacts of the Proposed Action

1. Soils: Livestock remove the cover of standing vegetation and litter, and compact the soil by trampling (Stoddart et al. 1975). These effects can lead to reduced infiltration rates and increased runoff. Reduced vegetative cover and increased runoff can result in higher erosion rates and soil losses, making it more difficult to produce forage and to protect the soil from further erosion. These adverse effects can be greatly reduced by maintaining an adequate vegetative cover on the soil (Moore et al. 1979). Rangeland vegetation inventory data from the allotment indicates that, at the level of grazing identified in the proposed action, the percent bare ground, litter, and vegetation found on the allotment fall within the parameters established by the RMP/EIS for this vegetative community. Proper utilization levels and grazing distribution patterns are expected to retain sufficient vegetative cover on the allotment, this will maintain the stability of the soils. Soil compaction and excessive vegetative use will occur at small, localized areas such as bedding areas, watering sites, and along trails. Positive affects from the proposed action may include acceleration of the nutrient cycling process and chipping of the soil crust by hoof action may stimulate seedling growth and water infiltration.

2. Vegetation: Vegetation will continue to be grazed and trampled by domestic livestock as well as other herbivores. The area has been grazed by livestock since the early part of the 1900's, if not longer. Ecological condition and trend is expected to remain stable as it has in the past. Rangeland vegetation inventory data indicates that there is an adequate amount of forage for the proposed number of livestock and for wildlife.

3. Wildlife: Domestic livestock will continue to utilize vegetative resources needed for a variety of wildlife species for life history functions within these allotments. The magnitude of livestock grazing impacts on wildlife is dependent upon the species of wildlife being considered, and its habitat needs. In general, livestock stocking rate adjustments have been made in the past to minimize the direct competition for those resources needed by a variety of wildlife species. Cover

habitat for wildlife will remain the same as it has been or the existing situation. Maintenance and operation of existing waterings will continue to provide dependable water sources for wildlife, as well as livestock.

4. T&E species: Under the proposed action there would be no affect to Federal threatened and endangered species since there are no known T/E occurrences within this allotment.

Special Status Species

Under the proposed action, lesser prairie chicken habitat would continue to be maintained. Vegetative composition and utilization levels on key grass species are such that the allotment provides most if not all of the habitat requirements needed for lesser prairie chickens. An indication of this analysis is the continual maintenance of lesser prairie chickens during the poor and droughty conditions of the 1970's, 1990's and the increase in birds in 1999 and 2000.

5 Livestock Management: Livestock would continue to be grazed under the same management system and the same numbers as authorized under the expiring lease. No adverse impacts are anticipated under the proposed action.

6. Visual Resources: The continued grazing of livestock would not affect the form or color of the landscape. The primary appearance of the vegetation within the allotment will remain the same.

7. Water Quality: No impacts to water quality is anticipated. Livestock would be dispersed over the allotment, and the soil would filter potential contaminants.

8. Air Quality: Dust levels under the proposed action would be slightly higher than under the no grazing alternative due to allotment management activities. The levels would still be within the limits allowed in a Class II area for the Prevention of Significant Deterioration of air quality.

9. Recreation: Grazing would have little or no affect on the recreational opportunities, since the recreating public has no legal or physical access to these parcels of public land. Recreation activities that could occur within this grazing allotment are limited or non-existent due to land status patterns.

10. Caves/Karst: No known significant caves or karst features are known to exist on the public lands located within this allotment. Grazing would not affect the karst resources.

B. Impacts of the No Livestock Grazing Alternative.

1. Soils: . Soil compaction would be reduced on the allotments around old trails and bedding grounds, there would be a small reduction in soil loss on the allotment.

2. Vegetation: It is expected that the number of plant species found within the allotments will remain the same, however, there would be small changes in the relative percentages of these species. Vegetation will continue to be utilized by wildlife. There would be an increase in the amount of standing vegetation. However, vegetation would become less vigorous and in long term

would become decadent.

3. Wildlife: Wildlife would have no competition with livestock for forage and cover.

4. T&E Species: There would be no impacts to threatened or endangered species or habitat. Special Status species habitat would be improved, especially during droughty conditions.

5. Livestock management: The forage from public land would be unavailable for use by the lessee/permittee . This would have an adverse economic impact to the livestock operation. If the No Grazing alternative is selected, the owner of the livestock would be responsible for ensuring that livestock do not enter Public Land [43 CFR 4140.1(b)(1)]. The checkerboard land status on the allotment makes it economically unfeasible to fence out the public land and use only the private land.

6. Visual Resources: There would be no change in the visual resources.

7. Water Quality: There could be slight improvement in water quality due to the potential lack of contaminants.

8. Air Quality: There would be a slightly less dust under this under this alternative versus the proposed alternative, but this would be negligible when considering all sources of dust.

9. Recreation: Impacts would be the same as the proposed action.

10. Caves/Karst: Impacts would be the same as the proposed action.

V. Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts of the grazing and no grazing alternatives were considered in Chapter 4 of Rangeland Reform `94 Draft Environmental Impact Statement and in Chapter 4 of the Roswell Resource Area Proposed RMP/EIS. The no livestock grazing alternative was not selected in either document.

On the allotment specific level, there will be no cumulatively significant impacts from the proposed action or from the no grazing alternative.

VI. Residual Impacts

The area has been grazed by livestock since the early part of the 1900's if not longer. Recent vegetative monitoring studies have shown that grazing , at the current permitted numbers of animals, is sustainable. If the mitigation measures are enacted, then there would be no residual impacts to the proposed action

VII. Mitigating Measures And/Or Permit/Lease Conditions

Vegetation monitoring studies will continue to be conducted and the permitted numbers of livestock will be adjusted if necessary. If new information surfaces that livestock grazing is negatively impacting other resources, action will be taken at that time to mitigate those impacts.

VIII. Fundamentals of Rangeland Health

The fundamentals of rangeland health are basic components of healthy rangelands and guiding principles for the development of standards and guidelines for livestock grazing. The fundamentals are identified in 43 CFR 4180.1 and pertain to watershed function, ecological processes, water quality and habitat for threatened and endangered species or other special status species. Based on the best available data and professional judgement, this EA addresses the fundamentals of Rangeland Health.

Field Office Staff Involvement/Review

John Spain - Rangeland Management Specialist
Rand French - Wildlife Management Biologist
Paul Happel - Outdoor Recreation Planner
Jim Schroeder - Watershed Specialist
Pat Flannary - Archeologist

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FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/RATIONALE

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT: I have reviewed this environmental assessment including the explanation and resolution of any potentially significant environmental impacts. I have determined the proposed action will not have significant impacts on the human environment and that preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

Rationale for Recommendations: The proposed action would not result in any undue or unnecessary environmental degradation. The proposed action will be in compliance with the Roswell Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision (October, 1997).

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T. R. Kreager, Date

Assistant Field Office Manager - Resources